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Welcome Home. An Ethnography on the Experiences of Airbnb Hosts in Commodifying Their Homes

2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2888>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Borm, Brigitte: Welcome Home. An Ethnography on the Experiences of Airbnb Hosts in Commodifying Their Homes. In: Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox u.a. (Hg.): *Digital Environments. Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld: transcript 2017, S. 39–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2888>.

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Welcome Home

An Ethnography on the Experiences of *Airbnb* Hosts in
Commodifying Their Homes

Brigitte Borm

Image 1



Home(page) *Airbnb*. www.airbnb.com Accessed: April 15, 2015.

Most serious thought in our time struggles with the
feeling of homelessness.

-Susan Sontag, "The Anthropologist as Hero"¹

The online platform of *Airbnb* allows users to rent out their house to other members of this community. As a host, you need to create a "profile" and a "listing" in which you describe your house and set a nightly price, basically turning your place or a part of it, into a hotel for specific dates. The city of Amsterdam has become one of *Airbnb*'s top destinations worldwide and for a long time the municipality of Amsterdam struggled with how to respond to this sudden increase of private renting. Much public discussion has taken place

¹ | Sontag in Jackson (1995: 27).

with regard to the impact on the city center, which indeed on busy days can feel more like a tourist attraction than anything else.

Whilst initially *Airbnb* was almost uniformly prohibited, in 2014 Amsterdam passed an “*Airbnb*-friendly law,” making it the first example of a European city hospitable to this new hosting platform.² Although *Airbnb* is now permitted, conditions are strict. Renting out through *Airbnb* is only allowed for 60 days a year; one has to pay taxes and not more than four guests are allowed at any one time. Social housing projects are not eligible, since they often do not permit subleasing. Because of this, *Airbnb* has become mostly a privilege for private house owners who have permission from their VvE (*Vereniging van Eigenaren*; translated from Dutch as: Association of House Owners).

Central to this research was the hosts’ own experiences, rather than the social impact on the scale of the city and its neighborhoods. Turning one’s home into a hotel, on the positive side, offers an alternative income for people in precarious financial situations. On a more critical note however, *Airbnb* makes the personal and private space of the home into a commodity. Does the concept of “home” still refer to one’s private and intimate place when it is made available as a temporary space for strangers? Most importantly, how does the perception, meaning, and experience of “home” change for people who participate as hosts in the virtual community of *Airbnb*? Tom Boellstorff (2012), the well-known anthropologist specializing in emerging online and offline worlds, states that anthropological research of online communities should explore the relationship between the virtual and the actual space, arguing that the border between these two is not blurring, but the spaces are becoming intertwined and interconnected in more profound ways (*ibid*: 40). Previous research on *Airbnb* and other hosting sites has mostly focused on the largely financial interaction around hospitality, mainly from the perspective of guests. For other interesting examples, see the research on racial discrimination against hosts (cf. Edelman/Luca 2014), on network sociality (cf. Molz 2014) and the monetizing of hospitality networks from hosts’ perspectives (cf. Ikkala/Lampinen 2015). No research has been done, however, on the possible change in the experience or the meaning of home for hosts.

The conceptualization of home has been contested in anthropological literature. As Irene Cieraad (2012) notes, the term “home”—often taken for granted—is ultimately a problematic, culturally constructed and multi-layered concept. For her, the concept of home refers to a “strong emotional bonding with a place and a material environment, ranging in scale from a room, a dwelling, or a residential institution to a street, a neighborhood, a village, a town, a region or even a country” (*ibid*: 68). Cieraad states the concept of home is so hard to define precisely because it is engrained in societal organization, since Western

² | <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2014/jul/08/airbnb-legal-troubles-what-are-the-issues> Accessed: May 5, 2016.

society thrives on the “emotional, social, and spatial opposition between the domains of home and work.” (*ibid.*). In the case of *Airbnb*, financial interactions are placed *inside* the home, in conflict with this societal construct of home and work as spatially opposite domains. As previous research has indicated, the act of performing paid work inside the home influences people’s experience of their home (Phizacklea/Wolkowitz 1995; Massey 1996; Duncan 1996). Therefore, does hosting through *Airbnb* then change the meaning of the home?

As with any other place, a home’s identity and meaning must be constructed and negotiated. Hence, the particular meaning of a home is flexible and changes over time. The home is constructed through its lived experience and is simultaneously an ideological construct, more so than a particular space. In the discursive construction of the meaning of home, affective emotions are of great importance. Somerville (1992) argues that, crucial to research on the topic is an understanding of “what home means to different people and to attempt to explain the range of different meanings that we find” (*ibid*: 115). In understanding the ascribing of identity to a particular space, the work of French anthropologist Marc Augé is essential. Augé (2008) describes the terms of anthropological place and non-place as vital to the contemporary age. The former, according to Augé, carries within it history, identity and relations; whereas the latter—instead of merely being defined as the negative of a place—is to be seen as a space that carries instructive, prohibitive and informative words, texts or symbols (*ibid*: 52, 96). According to Augé, the traveler’s spaces—typically roads, airports or hotel rooms—may be seen as the archetype of non-places (*ibid*: 86).

In the case of *Airbnb*, hosting can be understood as a constant redefinition of the home as either a place, a non-place, or somewhere in between. Augé writes that indeed neither of these places ever exist in a pure form, and that “place and non-place are not opposites but opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed” (*ibid*: 79). Whereas a home, to the host, can indeed be an anthropological place, by offering to rent it could thus be argued that it is (temporarily) transformed into a non-place. This transformation would occur by stripping the place of its history, its identity, its relations and unformulated rules of know-how; and replacing them with informative, prohibitive and instructive signs or texts.

Thus, the hosts’ private place becomes the archetypal non-place of the traveler. A possible transition from something being a place to being a non-place, can be found in the conceptualization of the home through the “social life of things”; a concept most famously described by Arjun Appadurai (1988). According to this renowned anthropologist, whilst humans attribute significance to things, precisely the “thing-in-motion” can give insight into its social contexts (*ibid*: 5). Appadurai proposes that when a “thing” is being exchanged it turns into a commodity. He distinguishes three modes of commodification of things: commodities by *destination* (originally intended

as primarily for exchange), by *metamorphosis* (firstly intended for other use, then turned into a commodity) and by *diversion* (something originally protected from this, then turned into a commodity) (*ibid*: 16). Hosting through *Airbnb* can mostly be seen as commodification by *metamorphosis*. How then does the perception, meaning, and experience of “home” change for people who choose to participate as hosts in the virtual community of *Airbnb*?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to answer this main research question, a multi-site ethnography and five in-depth interviews were carried out. Fieldwork was conducted in the virtual space of *Airbnb*, as well as in hosts’ homes. In this offline space, the virtual space—“profile” and “listing”—of *Airbnb* was visited together with the hosts. The hosts were asked to show their homes themselves: through *Skype* or offline. For the in-depth interviewing, semi-structured and open interview techniques were used following Bernard (1995). During the open part of the recorded interviews, respondents were asked about their meaning of home—by using the terms *home histories* and *homelessness*—hoping to grasp individual meanings of home. Notes were jotted down and extended directly after the interview and fieldwork. The aim here was to grasp whether, and if so how, the individual’s meaning of the home changed through these renting practices.

No representative sample was conducted since, in this research, an in-depth understanding of personal experience mattered more than a general representation of all *Airbnb* users. However, a diverse scope of gender, age and class was maintained where possible in the selection of participants. Only one of the participants was male, though this seemed to have relation to the group studied, a point that will be touched upon later.

Two of the participating hosts rented out their complete house; the other three intended to share their home with guests. Noteworthy here is that all of the hosts normally lived in the property and were not merely commercially exploiting the space. Three of the five participants were currently not hosting—this might indicate that people mostly host temporarily. Reasons for refraining from hosting provide important insights to the problems hosts encounter in their involvement with this platform. Two of the three hosts had stopped hosting—one temporarily and one permanently—because they felt the risks were too high. The third host, Magda, had an ongoing struggle with her association of house owners throughout the fieldwork up until this writing, in her attempt to get permission for renting out her house. In a few cases in Amsterdam, people have been evicted from their houses after hosting through *Airbnb*. This also raises ethical issues in carrying out research on *Airbnb* hosts, concerning the importance of safeguarding the identity of hosts. These points were discussed with all participants and as a

consequence most names have been changed. For the same reasons, limited information on the houses or their locations is disclosed.

BECOMING PART OF THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

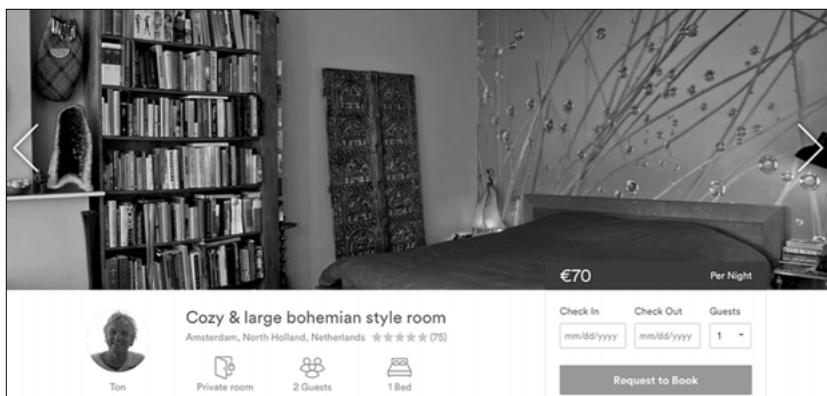
According to the introductory movie on the *Airbnb* homepage,³ *BELONG ANYWHERE*, “being an *Airbnb* host is to be part of a global community.” *Airbnb*’s website features people of different backgrounds, and uses the symbol of the earth to signify its global community.

For all of the hosts, financial reasons were deemed as more important to start hosting than joining a global community. Reasons varied from paying the mortgage after a divorce (Ton, 54), earning money as a freelancer with a burnout (Annie, 60), to providing extra funding for travel, nice things, or studies (Eva, 27; Isa, 26 and Magda, 34). However, this financial need did not mean the hosts were merely victims of their financial situation, forced to open up their homes. Common was the idea that hosting had to be something they enjoyed. Equally common however, was the discussion about the risks involved. In Isa’s case, her talk of risk concerned the possibility of people finding out about her unofficial hosting and the rise of anti-tourism/*Airbnb* movements in the city center. In the end, these were her main reasons to stop offering her home on *Airbnb*, she was afraid she would lose her home if her housing association would notice. With regard to another risk, Eva stated that she had experienced hosting on *Airbnb* as quite addictive because it was so easy to make money. If someone wants to make a booking, she says, *Airbnb* displays the amount you can earn with this offer and “as a student, you are not used to making that kind of money when you are just sleeping”. On the other hand, for Ton, an actual decrease of risk was his motivation to become part of *Airbnb*: to be able to pay the mortgage after his divorce, he had initially planned on growing cannabis. We walked down the stairs and he showed me a special wall he had built to this end. Eventually, he felt renting out through *Airbnb* was less risky in a legal sense; and the extra wall came in handy now.

For all the hosts interviewed, performing the role of a host was generally a pleasant experience. Eva says she experienced being a host as a playful way of making money, comparing it to young kids selling lemonade. She used to leave a bottle of wine on the table for people and fold the towels in a nice way. Isa and Annie expressed the fact that they did the same. Annie states that in her previous jobs, freelancing and working in advertising companies, she continuously felt she needed to sell herself. With hosting, Annie finally felt that she could just be herself, in the natural role of what she calls “mother hen.” In

this sense, the performative role of the host seems to be connected to what Butler (1990) describes as the performativity of gender roles. Identifying as female the behavior of taking care of people in a private space seemed to resonate with the hosts, regardless of their own gender. As the only male respondent, Ton stated that, maybe atypically for a man, he himself very much liked to receive people in his home and take care of them. He added that he felt most of the *Airbnb* guests were female too, or at least he noticed that mostly women are in charge of booking the rooms. Although this is not a quantitative study, the majority of hosts and active participants in host groups were female. In the online ethnography, more commercialized apartments more often seemed to be hosted by men. This points at possibly gendered aspects in the experience of the home and the performance of the role of the *Airbnb* host.

Image 2



Ton's listing, welcoming guests to his hometown www.airbnb.com Accessed: April 24, 2015.

COMMODIFYING THE HOME

Airbnb hosting in these cases can be understood as a commodification of *metamorphoses* as conceptualized by Appadurai (1988): a thing originally intended for another use is turned into a commodity. This process of commodification arose in three ways: firstly, by ripping a place of its personal identity particularly that contained in personal objects; secondly, by offering prescriptive and informative texts on how to use the place; and thirdly, by creating an idealized home. Isa offers the best illustration of this first aspect. Extensive cleaning was, for her, the biggest component of what might best be

understood as a ritual, eliminating any evidence of her identity from her home in order to construct it as a neutral apartment:

When you are cleaning your house like that and removing all of your personal things, it becomes more of a distant house ... So you tidy ... And you clean ... And that is a kind of process through which you're putting your most important things in the basement so they are gone, so to say. And then it becomes more of an apartment, just like any random apartment, instead of when your personal things are still there.

The personal things Isa removed were mostly objects that reminded her of her travels or of her parents' home; random things she liked and personal pictures. She said these would also be the objects she'd want to retrieve in the case of a fire. When asked for an example she points to a painting of birds, hanging on the wall. She made it for her dad when she was seven years old; it used to hang in the house where she grew up. Last June, when her parents moved, they gave it to her. She says that she likes the drawing because of its innocence, and it reminds her of the house she grew up in.

This process of transforming her home into a neutral apartment could be seen as a kind of commodifying or depersonalizing ritual. After guests had left, she would perform the same process in reverse order to retransform the random apartment back into her own again. Even if the place was clean already she would clean extensively before placing back her own things:

Because ... then some part of me somehow returned ... Now it is becoming mine again but then first I have to go over it myself before ... before my personal things are allowed back into the house ... Without it being obsessive but just because ... well, because yes, OK, now I'm back and now the place is mine again.

She contemplated that, because of this switch of mindset—from the place being hers to a neutral apartment—she had never really thought about what happened while she was hosting. For almost all hosts the feeling of home, amongst other aspects, lay in objects and their memories. When asked about feelings of homelessness, Annie recounts a burglary that occurred in her home where all her gold and silver items had been stolen:

Yes, that really pissed me off to be honest. But on the other hand, it did get me thinking, maybe it is better not to collect so many things. A while ago someone in my choir; her whole house had burned down, so once you've experienced that, nothing is important anymore ... A fire destroys everything and where does your luck then lie? And in what does your home then remain?

Instead of a home being a dwelling, in Annie's articulation, the home is supposed to be *in something*: objects with particular memories. When asked about experiences of homelessness, stories of fires or burglaries (destroying personal things) were more common than stories of actually being without a dwelling. As Isa states:

I think I can live in many different places. But in the end, a home is being made or shaped—it becomes your own—through the presence of your personal things, or things you have certain memories attached too. In general, I see a house as something functional. But it becomes personal through my personal things.

These are objects you are attached to; the objects you would take out of your home in the event of a fire. Magda too says the collecting of objects is a way of making her feel at home, just like her mom used to do. The kitchen is an area of the house that she "had really let herself go" and "decorated, I guess, the room that I would have wanted when I was a small girl."

The only exception in this stated connection with objects to the feeling of "home" is Ton. For him, above all, the city of Amsterdam is his home. On his *Airbnb* profile, Ton wrote about himself: "I love the city of Amsterdam and like to share its cosmopolitan and peaceful vibe." Ton's different perspective might relate to his personal history of living in squats; as Tom explains, he became quite used to sharing everything with other inhabitants. This different conceptualization recalls the diverse scales of Cieraad (2012), where the home can range from the large (a city) to the small scale (personal objects), although Cieraad does not mention the importance of objects in her definition of the home.

Image 3

Magda's kitchen: home as a place for your childhood dreams.

Commodification through metamorphosis and a switching mindset is also evident in Eva's case. It was the issue of noticing that strangers had lived in her home that Eva considers as her most uncomfortable experience with *Airbnb*. In her case, she had offered an informative text—in the form of house rules—on how her place was supposed to be treated. A violation around this in December had felt very uncomfortable. At that time, she had really needed the money and accepted a booking against her intuition. When she got back, the place had been trashed: cigarette butts were lying scattered all over the apartment, there was a bloodied tissue on the floor and she also noticed that the guests had been moving and touching her personal belongings. Striking in Eva's account the repetition of the reference to a burglary, as signifying something disgraceful had happened:

Normally you just don't see what happens. Now I did and it was uncomfortable. If there had been a burglary, you know that someone who wasn't allowed to enter your house. Here the problem is that you gave them permission to enter your house, and it was their home for that period of time.

Image 4

"Unlisted": Eva's living room on her *Airbnb* profile.

Even though Eva hired a cleaner and everything was back to normal within a day, she still felt uneasy after seeing what had happened in her home while she was away. Following this negative experience, for now, she was refraining from hosting. Normally, in conversations with guests, Eva avoids emphasizing that it is her home since, "You don't really want to think about it either, what people do to your home, what happened in your bed." In her document of house rules, however, she explicitly states that it *is* her home, with the first rule stating: "Please take good care of the apartment, it is our home." The rest of the text referred to descriptions of how to use specific aspects of the house. Like Eva, Annie also provided a similar list of house rules for guests. These documents can be seen as providing descriptive texts, pointing to the creation of a non-place as described by Augé (2008) in the commodification of the home. In these non-places people are reminded of a contract on how the non-place is supposed to be used by texts and symbols, defining its occupant as an individualized user (99-101).

All participants articulated the creation of an idealized home was important to their hosting. Performing the role of a good host was a crucial part in maintaining this ideal. As Magda states, in *CouchSurfing*⁴ people just have to

4 | Couchsurfing is another online community for hosting where, in contrast to Airbnb, no fees or other payments for the accommodation are involved. <https://www.couchsurfing.com>.

take or leave your place the way it is; with *Airbnb*, she expressed a wish to offer people value for their money. When I called by, she had a handyman coming over to work on a list of chores she felt were necessary before her home was suitable for hosting. She felt that the kitchen needed more attention, looking worried at the thought of how much work it would entail. Annie adopted a different approach, maintaining a spatial division: one part was for guests and another part was for herself, with a lock separating the two areas. In the hallway, she positioned a dresser for guests to put their dirty dishes so as not to enter her section of the house. Ton had bought new furniture, a fridge and a coffeemaker; and tidied up the place to make it as comfortable as possible for his guests.

Image 5



Proof of damage: picture for *Airbnb* customer service.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

For all of the hosts, the meaning of their home had not drastically changed through their participation with *Airbnb*. Metamorphosis was only temporary or partial.

Paradoxically, *Airbnb* gave Ton the possibility to keep his house instead of having to sell it after his divorce. For Annie, her house had become empty when

her two daughters had moved out; as a consequence of her hosting activities there was, once again, more social life in her house, through which she experienced her home to be more complete. Isa and Eva both mostly realized, how lucky they are to have their homes—so many people wanted to stay there.

At the time of this writing, I spoke with Eva again. She said that she had taken her first booking since January: “I feel like I can do it again.” Magda, still in dispute with her VvE, decided not to start renting until she had more certainty on what she was allowed to do.

A few issues arose from the data that deserve further theoretical attention and exploration. The point that personal objects or belongings can create a feeling of home—or at least a sense of belonging—is an issue that is worthy of more extensive focus in anthropological perspectives of the home. In this essay, it is suggested that the importance of objects might be added to the definition of home offered by Cieraad (2012). The reason for this is that most hosts articulated feelings of being “at home” through objects and their respective related memories. When asked about homelessness and home histories, stories about burglaries or fires destroying or disgracing the meaning of home and its objects, were more common than stories of actually being without a dwelling. References to homelessness during the periods hosts were renting out were absent. The lack of such reference can be explained by the partial renting out of the home or else a temporary distance made from the home. Commodification through metamorphosis, as formulated by Appadurai (1988), is thus partial or temporary in these cases; enacted through a cleaning ritual, the providence of instructive texts, a spatial division, or the creation of an idealized home.

Following from this research, two orientations seem to offer fruitful perspectives for future research on hosting experiences and the meaning of home. Firstly, there seems to be a gendered aspect in the experience of the home and the performance of being a host. In exactly what way gender and participation in *Airbnb* relate, needs to be explored in more detail. Secondly, the main motivation for hosting was money. Through this platform people found a solution for their precarious financial situations. The regulations and rules regarding *Airbnb*, set by jurisdiction and housing associations, juxtaposed with the tightening of availability of the state’s social benefits, is a topic that might be interesting to explore to larger extent.

Finally, conducting research on *Airbnb* gives opportunity to be involved in participant observation in the more normally inaccessible sites of private spaces of the home; also to make exploration into the meanings of the home. As Appadurai (1988: 5) states, the significance humans attribute to things can best be explored precisely when these meanings are “shifting, renegotiated and redefined,” such as in the case of homes being hosted through *Airbnb*.

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